



## Afghan poppy crop sets record

Nation produces nearly 95 percent of world's heroin supply, U.S. official says

**The Associated Press**

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WASHINGTON - Afghanistan will produce another record poppy harvest this year that cements its status as the world's near-sole supplier of the heroin source, yet a furious debate over how to reverse the trend is stalling proposals to cut the crop, U.S. officials say.

As President Bush prepares for weekend talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, divisions within the U.S. administration and among NATO allies have delayed release of a \$475 million counternarcotics program for Afghanistan, where intelligence officials see growing links between drugs and the Taliban, the officials said.

U.N. figures to be released in September are expected to show that Afghanistan's poppy production has risen up to 15 percent since 2006 and that the country now accounts for 95 percent of the world's crop, 3 percentage points more than last year, officials familiar with preliminary statistics told The Associated Press.

But counterdrug proposals by some U.S. officials have met fierce resistance, including boosting the amount of forcible poppy field destruction in provinces that grow the most, officials said. The approach also would link millions of dollars in development aid to benchmarks on eradication; arrests and prosecutions of narcotradars, corrupt officials; and on alternative crop production.

Those ideas represent what proponents call an "enhanced carrot-and-stick approach" to supplement existing anti-drug efforts. They are the focus of the new \$475 million program outlined in a 995-page report, the release of which has been postponed twice and may be again delayed due to disagreements, officials said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because parts of the report remain classified.

Counternarcotics agents at the State Department had wanted to release a 123-page summary of the strategy last month and then again last week, but were forced to hold off because of concerns it may not be feasible, the officials said.

Now, even as Bush sees Karzai on Sunday and Monday at the presidential retreat in Camp David, Md., a tentative release date of Aug. 9, timed to follow the meetings, appears in jeopardy. Some in the administration, along with NATO allies Britain and Canada, seek revisions that could delay it until at least Aug. 13, the officials said.

The program represents a 13 percent increase over the \$420 million in U.S. counternarcotics aid to Afghanistan last year. It would adopt a bold new approach to "coercive eradication" and set out criteria for local officials to receive development assistance based on their cooperation, the officials said.

Although the existing aid, supplemented mainly by Britain and Canada and supported by the NATO force in Afghanistan, has achieved some results — notably an expected rise in the number of "poppy-free" provinces from six to at least 12 and possibly 16, mainly in the north — production elsewhere has soared, they said.

"Afghanistan is providing close to 95 percent of the world's heroin," the State Department's top counternarcotics official, Tom Schweich, said at a recent conference. "That makes it almost a sole-source supplier" and presents a situation "unique in world history."

Almost all the heroin from Afghanistan makes its way to Europe; most of the heroin in the U.S. comes from Latin America.

Afghanistan last year accounted for 92 percent of global opium production, compared with 70 percent in 2000 and 52 percent a decade earlier. The higher yields in Afghanistan brought world production to a record high of 7,286 tons in 2006, 43 percent more than in 2005.

A State Department inspector general's report released Friday noted that the counternarcotics assistance is dwarfed by the estimated \$38 billion "street value" of Afghanistan's poppy crop, if all is converted to heroin, and said eradication goals were "not realistic."

**'They need to be dealt with'**

Schweich, an advocate of the now-stalled plan, has argued for more vigorous eradication efforts, particularly in southern Helmand province, responsible for some 80 percent of Afghanistan's poppy production. It is where, he says, growers must be punished for ignoring good-faith appeals to switch to alternative, but less lucrative, crops.

"They need to be dealt with in a more severe way," he said at the conference sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "There needs to be a coercive element, that's something we're not going to back away from or shy away from."

But, in fact, many question whether this is the right approach with Afghanistan mired in poverty and in the throes of an insurgency run by the Taliban and residual al-Qaida forces.

Along with Britain, whose troops patrol Helmand, elements in the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, the Defense Department and White House Office of National Drug Control Policy have expressed concern, saying that more raids will drive farmers with no other income to join extremists.

There is also skepticism about the incentives in the new strategy from those who believe development assistance should not be denied to local communities because of poppy growth, officials said.

Opponents argue that the benefits of such aid, new roads and other infrastructure, schools and hospitals, will themselves be powerful tools to combat the narcotrade once constructed.

One U.S. official said the plan was a good one but might take another year or two before it can be effectively introduced.

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